

Archives

Introduction

A fundamental obligation of government is to care for its historical records. The permanent records of state agencies and authorities provide crucial evidence for understanding the basic organization of government and society. Their identification and maintenance is the responsibility of the New Jersey State Archives.

When properly cared for and arranged, the documents, photographs, films, and other media that record the history of state government can be preserved permanently.

The term “archives” has three related meanings:

1. **The records** of citizens, public agencies and officials, or private organizations that are preserved because of their permanent legal, fiscal, historical, or aesthetic value
2. **The agency** responsible for administering systems and procedures used to maintain archival records
3. **The facility** or repository for public research and equipment used to house archival records securely under controlled environmental conditions

Objectives of an Archives

The objectives of an archival agency are to secure the transfer of inactive records that have permanent value, and to provide for their preservation in an environmentally controlled facility that is accessible to the public for research.

The State Archives

The New Jersey State Archives is the official repository for all colonial and state government records of enduring historical value. The State Archives produces a variety of printed and microfilm publications describing its holdings and services, and sells microfilm copies of many important series of historical documents, manuscripts, and newspapers. The Archives also provides public reference services by mail and at the Archives Search Room which is open Tuesday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

The State Archives is administered by the New Jersey Department of State, Division of Archives

and Records Management, Bureau of Archives and Records Preservation. The Archives appraises and accessions records of historical significance to New Jersey. Such records are maintained in a secure facility under optimum environmental conditions, and are available to the public for research. Archives staff advises public officials on methods for identifying and preserving historical records, and frequently assists in the recovery of archival records damaged by water or fire. All consultative services are provided free of charge to public sector agencies.

The State Archives has five basic functions in administering the permanent records of state government agencies and authorities: appraisal, accessioning, processing, storage, and reference services.

Records Appraisal

Archival appraisal is the process of deciding which records should be kept permanently. Public records document the actions and transactions of government and must be retained for various lengths of time in accordance with administrative, legal, and fiscal requirements. However, as a general rule for most state agencies and authorities, ***only three to five percent of an agency's records are likely to have permanent value.*** Routine appraisal decisions have been greatly simplified by the adoption of general and specific records retention schedules. (See section II, Records Management.)

In some instances the Archives may want to preserve a record permanently even if the retention schedule allows for destruction. For example, correspondence is usually scheduled for destruction after three years, but the correspondence of an important officer — such as a commissioner or a division director — may deserve permanent retention because it provides important insights into the history of an agency or authority. Through the normal records disposal process monitored by the division, the State Archives may elect to appraise these kinds of records to ensure that important historical evidence is not destroyed. In other instances, the final disposition for a record series may be listed by the self-explanatory term, "archival review." The Archives' authority to appraise and preserve historical records is established in N.J.A.C. 15:3-2.11.

The Archives may also decide to preserve original records, even if they have already been microfilmed, because they possess "intrinsic value." Records have intrinsic value when their age, physical form, or other characteristics make them historically important for reasons other than the information they contain. Such records should be preserved in their original form. Most permanent records without intrinsic value, on the other hand, can be destroyed after being microfilmed or otherwise reproduced.

Archivists carefully balance the need to preserve records of enduring value against the limits imposed by storage and personnel costs. Since records retention schedules designate only a minimum amount of time that records must be kept, state agencies and authorities may keep records longer if they want. On the other hand, unnecessary retention of nonpermanent records wastes tax dollars because of the high cost of storage and maintenance (see section III), and defeats the purpose of comprehensive records management. Consultations to determine the archival value of records are available by contacting the State Archives.

Accessioning

After records have been appraised and identified as permanent, their accessioning or transfer into

the physical and legal custody of the State Archives may occur. Records transferred to the State Archives become the permanent legal responsibility of the Archives. ***This transfer of legal custody is a major distinction between the services provided by the State Archives and the Records Storage Center.*** In the RSC, only physical custody passes from the agency of origin; legal ownership is not affected. The agency may request the return of its records at any time, and it alone controls access to those records.

The State Archives will never return transferred records to the agency of origin. Public access restrictions necessary for certain archival records must be mutually agreed upon by the agency of origin and the State Archives prior to transfer. State government offices that convey custody of their permanent records to the State Archives should be aware of these distinctions.

The accessioning of records into the custody of the State Archives is documented by an "Accession Record" form which contains:

1. An appraisal report, occasionally
2. Name of the office of origin
3. Record series title(s)
4. Inclusive dates (or date span)
5. Volume in cubic feet
6. Internal arrangement of files, including a note on their condition
7. A brief summary of the informational content of the files
8. A copy of any indexes or inventories that give access to the records
9. A brief statement of any access or use restrictions that may apply to the records

To acknowledge transfer of legal custody of the records to the State Archives, a form is signed by authorized representatives of the transferring office and the State Archives.

Processing

Archival records deserve special care and handling to ensure their preservation and usefulness for research. Processing records accessioned into the State Archives involves four basic tasks: preliminary inspection, arrangement and sorting, description, and mending or placement in protective containers. Since performing these tasks requires specialized training, state agencies should contact the State Archives prior to handling any records in damaged or poor condition. ***Well-meaning records clerks should not attempt any type of document repair, especially mending with scotch tape.***

Storage Requirements

Because archival records are intended for permanent preservation, special care must be taken with handling and storage. The environment in which records are stored — the temperature, humidity, light, and air purity — is essential to prevent deterioration.

Archival records must be maintained in a manner that protects them from these principal hazards:

1. **Excessive fluctuations of temperature and humidity** — Fluctuations of temperature and humidity put stress on paper, bound materials, and film emulsions by causing them to expand and contract. High heat and humidity cause film emulsions to soften and magnetic tapes to become unstable. Also, when high temperatures are combined with high humidity, conditions become ideal for microorganisms, insects and vermin, staining, and chemical reactions in paper and leather.
2. **Infestation by insects and vermin** — Leather, glue, pastes, and paper are organic substances — a good source of food for vermin.
3. **Contamination by dust and other airborne impurities** — Dirt and dust pose a long-term hazard to records. Accumulated dust and debris can soil books and papers and provide a haven for the growth of insects and mold. Also, airborne pollutants eventually corrode record materials. In storage areas with high temperature and humidity, sulfides and nitrates from automobile exhaust can convert to sulfuric acid or nitric acid to destroy paper and leather.
4. **Excessive or improper handling** — Permanent records must be handled with care at all times. In many cases, fragile or damaged original records can be preserved by microfilming and using the microfilm copies for research. Food, drink, and smoking should never be allowed in archival storage or research facilities.
5. **Fire** — Combustible materials must not be stored near permanent records. Archives should also be equipped with a sprinkler or other fire-suppression system.
6. **Theft** — The Archives should protect their collection by continually monitoring access to search rooms and other public areas. Patrons should never be permitted to enter storage areas.

Storing permanent records in the State Archives will most effectively protect them against all of these hazards. Related concerns for providing state government records with security against various forms of deterioration or destruction are addressed in section III, Records Storage, and section VII, Vital Records. It is important to note once again, however, that because archival records are permanent, their storage requirements are considerably more stringent.

Reference Services

Reference services provided to the public include explaining the basic content and arrangement of records at the State Archives, retrieving records from storage for research, and demonstrating their use. The Archives staff does not perform extensive research for the public.

To minimize the risk of records damage or theft, the State Archives monitors research use carefully.

The Archives registers all visitors daily. Public access to storage areas is forbidden, and researchers may not use pens, briefcases, or other containers at the research tables. Patrons are never allowed to remove records from the search room or to transfer them to other researchers.

Summary

The State Archives provides for the permanent preservation of government records of enduring historical value for New Jersey. Only a small percentage of all the records created by state agencies and authorities have sufficient research value to warrant archival preservation.

As its first task, the Archives' appraises records worthy of permanent preservation, basing its decisions on an appraisal of their importance for historical research or legal evidence, or their intrinsic value — their age, physical form, or other physical characteristics. The appraisal process has been simplified by records retention schedules that designate both permanent records and those subject to review for possible placement in the State Archives.

Once judged to be permanent, the records are transferred to the State Archives by the agency of origin with proper documentation. The Archives' staff then processes the records by arranging and describing them, and inspecting them to determine their preservation needs. Finally, the Archives securely stores the records in an environmentally controlled facility to minimize deterioration while providing controlled access to the public for research.

The division offers archival consulting services free of charge to state agencies and authorities. For information or assistance, call the State Archives at (609) 292-6260, or write: New Jersey Department of State, New Jersey State Archives, 185 West State Street, CN 307, Trenton, New Jersey 08625.